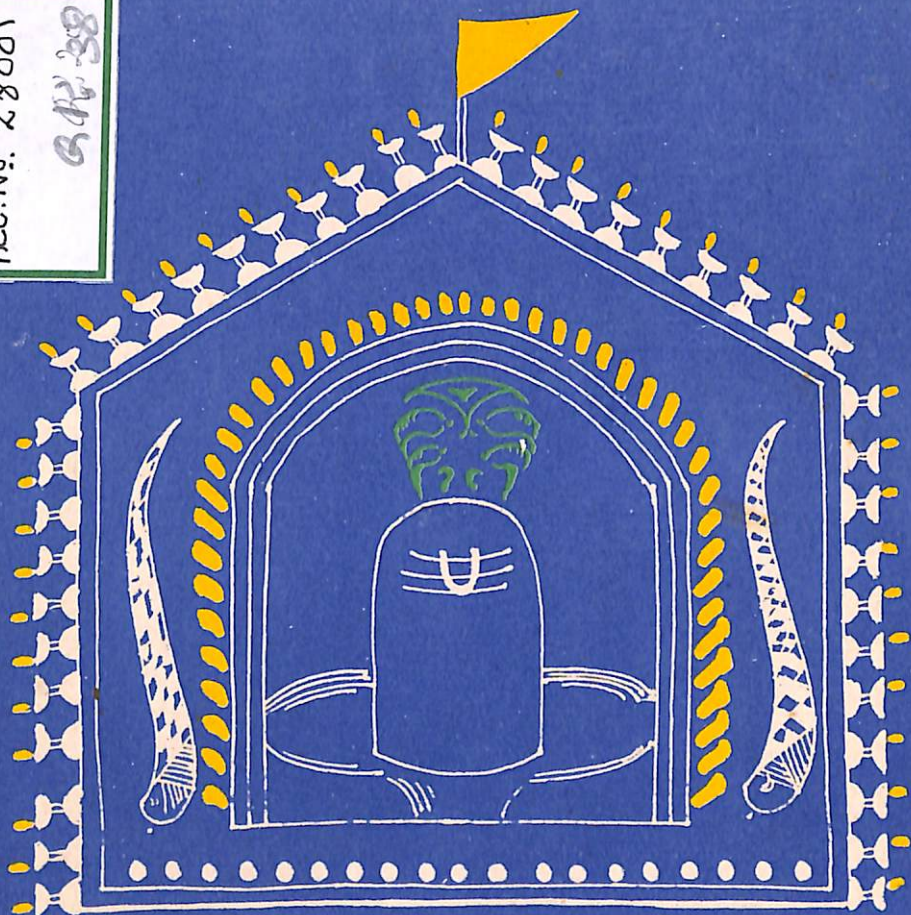


Snake Worship in India

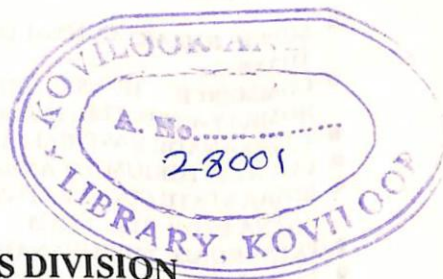
G. RAVINDRAN NAIR

Acc. No. 28001
G.R. 38



SNAKE WORSHIP IN INDIA

G. Ravindran Nair



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting
Government of India

MARCH 1993 (PHALGUNA 1914)

© PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

Price : Rs. 18.00

PUBLISHED BY THE DIRECTOR, PUBLICATIONS DIVISION,
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING,
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA,
PATIALA HOUSE, NEW DELHI-110 001

SALES EMPORIA ● PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

- SUPER BAZAR, CONNAUGHT CIRCUS, NEW DELHI-110001, TEL.: 3313308
- COMMERCE HOUSE, CURRIMBOY ROAD, BALLARD PIER, BOMBAY-400038, TEL.: 2610081
- 8, ESPLANADE EAST, CALCUTTA-700 069, TEL.: 286696
- LLA AUDITORIUM, 736 ANNA SALAI, MADRAS-600002, TEL.: 867643
- BIHAR STATE COOPERATIVE BANK BUILDING, ASHOKA RAJPATH, PATNA-800004, TEL.: 653823
- PRESS ROAD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM-695001, TEL.: 68650
- 10-B, STATION ROAD, LUCKNOW-226019, TEL.: 245785
- STATE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM BUILDING, PUBLIC GARDEN, HYDERABAD-500004, TEL.: 236393

PRINTED AT AKASHDEEP PRINTERS, NEW DELHI-2

CONTENTS

	Page
1) Introduction	1
2) The Legends and the Tradition	5
3) Serpent Worship in Kerala	18
4) The Omnipresence of Serpent Cult	27
5) Festivals for the Snake God	37
6) Snake Cult in Art	43

Introduction

An oblation of rice and milk and the subdued burning of camphor and incense sticks, the flickering wicks soaked in the shimmering brass lamps crested with the swan image and the strewn flower petals all invoke an abiding faith and awe in the inscrutable powers of the snake god. Through the corridors of time one hears the echo of chorus songs and dance beats all in praise of the powers that the snakes are believed to possess. An ancient snake cult still flourishes in the woodlands of Pampumekkattumana near Trichur in Kerala. An eerie quietness pervades the place, with its lichened stonewalls, the dense and towering jungles, the moss-covered temple tank and the granite images of cobras with outspread hoods. One could feel the snake god's omnipresence, though one may not see any live snake around. Farther south in Kerala is another snake shrine at Mannarasala near Haripad in Alleppey District.

Perhaps the only city in India that derives its name and origin from a snake shrine is Nagercoil, the headquarters of Kanyakumari District in Tamil Nadu; the Nagarammkoil of the city has its close links with the priestly family of Pampumekkattumana.

In both Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu serpents are also believed to contribute to the fertility of the soil. Hence they are held in awe by peasants as well. This explains why some of the priests in Tamil Nadu serpent shrines come from agricultural communities like the Padayachi. In both these States the carved images in stone of the cobra can be found under the sprawling pipal tree in almost every temple or near the temple tanks. In many temples of Kerala, after the offering of prayers in the sanctum sanctorum of the main temple, devotees make it a point to go around the altar of snake deities, offering flowers and fruits.

In many parts of India there is a popular belief that the eight fabled serpents (Ashta Nagas) as described in the Puranas i.e. Ananta, Vasuki, Karkotaka, Pinglaka, Shankha, Padma, Mahapadma and Takshaka are still in existence. The roots of the snake cult run deep in different parts of India. Some believers still associate the family prosperity with the ritual of propitiating the snake deity. Periodical offerings are made to serpents, regarded as the tutelary deity of many a family.

There is concrete evidence to indicate that during the Indus Valley Civilisation at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa there was a section of people who worshipped the snake gods. The celebrated archaeologist, John Marshall avers that the Nagas' habitat is "one of the seven regions of Puranic geography, and they had dispersed along coastal regions of the Indian Ocean and crossed over to Ceylon."

The great conqueror Alexander the Great ^{→ now in Pakistan} came into contact with the followers of the snake cult in Takshasila. The chronicler Abul Fazel refers to the representations of the serpent gods in stones set up and worshipped in 700 places. Up to the Muslim invasion of India the people between Kabul and Kashmir worshipped serpent gods. There were Hindu kings in Kabul who worshipped serpents more than two centuries before Huen Tsang's arrival about 631 AD. Nagarajas were numerous and powerful and they held sway as independent chieftains in the region between Yamuna and Narmada during the first two centuries of the Christian Era. With the Brahminic revival in the wake of the downfall of Buddhism, the protagonists of the Naga cult were forced to embrace orthodox Hinduism.

In Buddhism too there are prolific references to serpentology. Sanghamitra, daughter of King Ashok, had once to assume the form of Garuda to counteract the magic power of the Nagas who tried to snatch the branch of the Bodhi tree she was carrying with her. The Sanchi stupa also abounds in reliefs representing the Nagaraja sheltering Lord Buddha under its majestic hood.

Who can forget the grand spectacle of the poly-headed Ananta or Shesha Naga on whom rests Lord Vishnu in the Ocean of Milk?

Introduction

3

Our epics and scriptures make ample reference to the deification of snakes and the roles played by snake gods in different episodes.

India apart, in many countries the serpent has been worshipped as a symbol of water, longevity or wisdom perhaps because of its wiggling movement, renewal after the sloughing of its skin and its unblinking stare. "The entire globe is supported, not upon the shoulders of the mighty giant Atlas, as the Greeks had imagined, but upon the raised hood or head of a huge serpent called "Shesha".

The serpent did not get all that enviable niche in the *Bible*, however. His wily role in the Garden of Eden and the fall of man is well known. "Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that Lord had made.....He said to the woman....."Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.".....And after God discovered that Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of knowledge, He cursed the serpent....."upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the day of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel."

In Egypt the serpent symbolised fertility. The snake goddess Ejo was worshipped in the lower Nile Valley, and was usually depicted as an asp (the Egyptian variety of cobra). It was the deadly fangs of the asp that Cleopatra used to kill herself. As a golden emblem worn on the forehead, Ejo was not only the pride of Pharaohs, but also a symbol of protection to royalty.

The ancient Greeks and Romans took the snakes as the earthly manifestations of gods. The Greek God Zeus was thought often to assume the form of a serpent when he visited the earthly beings.

The Hopi snake dance, sacred to the American Indians in south-west part of USA symbolises the snake as the god of fertility. It is a nine-day festival which includes, among other things, the capture of rattle snakes and keeping them in a sacred place for a number of days. The finale comes when the snakes have an ablution followed by an orgy of dance with the snakes dangling from the mouths of dancers. The ceremony, the Indians believe, would bring them the long-awaited rains for the arid countryside.

In Tibet, China and Germany the snake gods are believed to control the lakes, springs, rivers and rains. The serpent is very much linked with water for it is during the rains that the snakes, driven out of their holes by the water, seek a refuge in the dwelling of man. They are also said to have a sway over the fertility of the Mother Earth. The Chinese have even adopted the Dragon (the Giant Snake) as the protector of their Empire and as a ferocious symbol of their warlordship. There are shrines in China dedicated to Ling Wang, the Dragon King who is the guardian deity of China.

Sometime in June 1976, a cobra is said to have helped Juma Khamrayev, a staff member of the University library in Samarkhand, Soviet Uzbekistan, to locate a treasure chest of rare manuscripts. Khamrayev was visiting a forlorn village dotted with many mud huts where the Uzbeks lived early this century. In one of the huts he noticed a snake and recalled an ancient legend which mentioned about the snake keeping vigil over archives. After scaring away the snake with a flourish of the stick, he began inspecting the room. He touched the old wall where the cobra was spotted. At the mere touch of the hand, half the wall caved in and ancient manuscripts fell at his feet.

The most valuable finds Khamrayev sorted out were the works of the famous poet of the East, Abdurakhman Jami, titled, *Usuf and Suleika* (15th century) and *The Ethics* by an unknown thinker of the Middle Ages and the translation in the Tajik language from the poetical works by Amir Khazma (18th century).

Serpentology should not be considered in isolation. Throughout the centuries, the devotees, immersed in tradition, have been seeing God in every living object. Be it the cow (beloved of Lord Krishna), the bull (the famous Nandi in Siva temples), the cattle (worshipped by the Tamils during Pongal festival), the rat (regarded as the vehicle of Lord Ganapati), the peacock (the mount of Lord Subrahmanyam), the Garuda, the monkey (revered in many parts of Karnataka), etc., the ardent votary finds the divine presence not only in animals, but in plants like the basil or *Tulasi* which he worships every morning.

The Legends and the Tradition

Few countries in the world have given such a prominent place in literature, folk arts and the like to snake cult as in India. Over a vast space of time deified serpents have haunted the Hindu mind.

There are three chief repositories of the serpent lore; the *Mababbarata*, the *Jatakas* and the *Rajatarangini*.

Here is an interesting passage from the *Yajurveda*: "Homage be to the snakes whichsoever move along the earth. Which are in the sky and heaven, homage to these snakes. Which are the arrows of sorcerers and of three spirits, and which lie in holes, homage be to those snakes. Which are in the brightness of heaven, and which are in the rays of sun, which have made their abodes in the water, homage be to those snakes."

The snake cult is so time-honoured in India that people offer even today milk, rice powder and turmeric powder to propitiate the snake god. The king cobra is very much part of our rich and variegated folklore, religion and art; the two important festivals of Naga Panchami and Ananta Chaturdasi are closely based on the snake cult. Milk and other offerings are made to propitiate the snake goddess Manasa, regarded as the sister of the legendary Naga king Vasuki. The snake goddess Manasa is depicted and exhibited as a beautiful woman covered with snakes and crouching on water lily. Goddess Manasa is believed to be the patron deity of snakes and affords protection against snake bite to her devotees.

Who can forget the immortal *Kaliyamardana* story in *Srimad Bhagavata* and Krishna's dalliance on the hood of the Naga and his subsequent subduing of the poisonous serpent that polluted the waters of the Yamuna. Krishna not only made the waters of the river

safe for the people by ousting the Kaliya Naga but released the serpent from the curse that made him take the form of Kaliya Naga.

Who hasn't heard the story of *Palazhimathanam*? The colourful churning of the ocean! The gods and demons joined hands to make use of the Meru mountain for churning the ocean and utilised the coils of the Naga Vasuki as the churning rope. The supreme purpose of this gigantic churning was to get nectar so that the gods could rejuvenate themselves.

Many of the Hindu gods give a pride of place to the snake. For instance, Lord Ganesha is shown with a weapon called the Naga Baan or the snake arrow. Lord Siva is shown as an ardent snake lover, wearing a garland of deadly snakes around his neck. Incidentally, it is said that when the churning of the ocean yielded, besides other things, deadly poison, nobody was able to bear its fatal impact except Lord Siva who swallowed the snake poison which lodged itself in the throat of Lord Siva, making the entire neck blue. So Siva came to be called Nilakantha or the one with the Blue Neck.

The Kashmir Valley and the Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh abound in snake shrines dedicated to gods like Shesha Naga, Vasuki, Karkotaka and the like. In the Chenab valley there are temples dedicated to Vasuki shown as the king of serpents with Jimutavahana as his Prime Minister. The legend goes that Jimutavahana once offered his own body to Lord Garuda in lieu of a snake which was destined to be the morsel of food for Lord Garuda. Garuda was moved by the spirit of sacrifice of Jimutavahana and let Jimutavahana and the other snake go. This earned for Jimutavahana the eternal gratitude of the snake kingdom.

The famous Kashmir dynasty of King Lalitaditya is believed to have descended from the legendary serpent Karkotaka.

Reverting to the snake lore in ancient India, we find that the *Grihyasutra* gives an account of *Sarpabali*, the annual rites for honouring and warding off snakes. It is a four-month long ceremony, starting off in the month of Sravana, the first month of the rainy

The Legends and the Tradition

7

season and concluding on the full moon of Margasirsha, the first month of winter. During this period people sleep on bedsteads raised from the ground in order to protect themselves against snakes. The concluding ceremony is called *Pratyavarohana*, meaning "the descending or moving downwards."

As in India, in Europe too the snake legend is very prominent in medieval literature, especially in books dealing with natural history like *Liber de Proprietate Rerum* by Bartholomaeus Anglicus. There is a mention of serpent lore in Renaissance poets like Shakespeare too. The way of a serpent upon rock was one of the four things which were too wonderful for king Solomon (Prov XXX, 19). "The serpent alone of all animals," Eusebius wrote, "without legs or arms or any of the usual appliances of locomotion, still moves with singular celerity." In ancient India this peculiarity found expression in a number of synonyms by which the snake is designated in Sanskrit literature. The *Amarakosa* contains no less than 25 synonyms for a snake such as *bhujaga*, *bhujanga*, *bhujangama*, *Pannaga*, *uraga*, *jibmaga*, *urogama*, *uranga*, *kundalini*, etc.

The casting of the skin is another peculiarity of the snake which is reflected in folklore. In a verse of the *Rigveda* (IX, 86,44) the gushing streams of strained *Soma* is compared to a serpent creeping out of the slough. From a hymn of the *Atharva Veda* it is evident that the sloughs are carefully collected on account of the magical powers ascribed to the serpent. The practice of casting off the skin suggested longevity or even immortality in the snake, an idea which can be traced in ancient India. The *Tandya-mahabramana* (XXV, 15) refers to a serpent sacrifice, celebrated by the snakes, who thereby gain a footing in the world. The officiating priests mentioned include Takshaka and Janamejaya. The text says: "By this sacrifice, verily, the snakes have conquered death; death is conquered by those who will perform this sacrifice. Therefore, they cast off their old skin, and having cast to the same, they creep out of it. The snakes are Adityas; like unto the splendour of Adityas is the splendour of those who perform this sacrifice."

The casting of a snake's skin is a favourite simile found in Vedic and epic literature. It is especially applied to liberating one's self from evil and to the liberation from mundane existence.

The destructive action of snake bite is often compared to all-devouring fire. The Naga Takshaka, by his fiery bite, reduces a banyan tree to ashes and sets King Parikshit's one-pillared hall on fire. The pool of the Yamuna infested by the Naga Kaliya is described as overcast with a dense smoke caused by the poison-born fire, the surface of the water being hot with venomous flames. Even the birds of the sky did not approach it, and when grass fell in the water it was burnt by its heat.

Paradoxically, the poison of the snake is also credited with a healing virtue, especially in counteracting poison. "With poison I smite thy poison," says a verse in *Atharva Veda*. The episode of Bhima's visit to the Naga world illustrates that vegetable poison is 'killed' by animal poison, and in the famous tale of King Nala, we find that the hero, when possessed of the evil spirit of Kali, is freed by the bite of Naga Karkotaka.

In the *Mahabharata* we are told the story of the serpent sacrifice instituted by King Janamejaya, the Pandava ruler of Hastinapura.

The Snake Sacrifice of Janamejaya

Here we meet the origin of the Nagas: they are the sons of Kadru (the Tawny One) who is a personification of the Earth. Her sister Vinata (the Bent one), the goddess of Heaven, became the mother of the two sons: Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun-God, and Garuda, who was appointed the carrier of Vishnu. The enmity between the Nagas and their cousin Garuda is a favourite theme in Indian literature and art.

The two sisters, Kadru and Vinata, so the story goes, laid a wager, which the first won by sheer fraud. To those (of her sons) who had refused to be partners in the fraud, the Serpent-Mother

The Legends and the Tradition

9

cursed; they were to perish in the fire of King Janamejaya's holocaust. The immediate cause of the serpent sacrifice was the violent death of Janamejaya's father Parikshit, who, while engaged in hunting, had imprudently insulted an ascetic who had taken a vow of silence and consequently gave no answer to the king's question. Enraged, Parikshit flung a dead snake round the shoulders of the hermit who, however, remained unmoved. But his youthful son, on learning the insult inflicted on his aged father, cursed the king; on the seventh day from thence, Takshaka, the Nagaraja, would kill him.

Despite all precautions, the curse had its effect. On the seventh day, at sunset, the king ate some fruit in which was hidden Takshaka in the form of a worm. Suddenly the Naga assumed his real form and bit the king. The burning poison of the dragon set ablaze the palace and King Parikshit collapsed as if struck by lightning.

It was at the instigation of the Brahmin Uttanka that Parikshit's son Janamejaya resolved to take revenge on Takshaka for the death of his father. King Janamejaya enquired from his priests whether they knew any rite by which Takshaka could be compelled to throw himself in the sacrificial fire.

A few scholars interpret the famous snake-sacrifice of Janamejaya as not so much the result of the killing of king Parikshit by a Naga as an indication of a long-drawn-out feud between the royal family of the Pandavas and a section of the Nagas. This theory gains further support in the earlier account of the Khandavadabala, the extermination of the Nagas by the Pandava warrior Arjuna and the promised support offered by Takshaka to Karna in the latter's bid to kill Arjuna.

Like King Parikshit condemned to die of snake bite, we come across the story of Nahush in the Mahabharata where he is said to have forced the sages, including Kashyapa, to carry his palanquin. Nahush, the father of the famous Yayati, was soon cursed to become a serpent. It is said that as a serpent Nahush once accosted Bhima

in the forest suggesting that he (Nahush) was his real ancestor. Elsewhere, we are told that Nahush was a Naga born of Kadru and Kashyapa. When Bhima is poisoned by Duryodhana and thrown into the river, he is said to have been taken to the Nagaloka where the Naga King Aryaka rescued him by giving nectar. Aryaka tells him (Bhima) that he is his ancestor. Bhima is a Naga himself (probably of the Naga clan) and is said to be a descendant of Nahush. Another theory is that Nahush was a Naga king, with serpent as his tutelary deity.

Principal Nagarajas in Scriptures

Shesha or Ananta

Shesha or Ananta occupies a pride of place among the divine serpents mentioned in the epic literature. He is often extolled as the sovereign of all Nagas, but Vasuki is also accorded equal importance in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Both are mentioned side by side, Vasuki evidently being considered as the first among the serpents (sarpa) and the Ananta as the chief of the Nagas.

*'Ayudhanam aham vajram
dhenunam asmi kamadbuk
Prajanas ca smi kandarpah
sarpanam asmi vasukih'*

Bhagavad Gita, Chapter X. stanza 28

(Among the weapons, I am the thunderbolt; among the cows I am Kamdhenu; I am Kandarpa, the cause for offspring; among serpents, I am Vasuki)

So says Lord Krishna of himself while preaching the sermon of the *Gita* to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Swami Chinmayananda gives the following interpretation: "Vasuki is a serpent described in our mythology as ever living on Siva's ring finger as an adornment. Though so small as to become a

The Legends and the Tradition

11

ring on the finger of Lord, it was Vasuki who volunteered himself to serve as a rope in the churning process of the milky ocean. This naturally reminds one of the Upanishadic declaration that it is the minutest of the minute and the greatest of the great. Naturally it is very apt that the Lord declared himself to be a 'Vasuki among the snakes'. The term 'sarpa' is to be rightly understood in contrast with the Nagas mentioned in the next stanza. Sarpa means single-hooded while Nagas are multi-hooded."

*'Anantas ca smi naganam
varuno yadasam abam
Pitrnam aryama ca smi
yamab samyamata abam'*

Chapter X, stanza 29. ibid.

(I am Ananta among Nagas; I am Varuna of water deities; Aryama of Pitrus or ancestors; I am, among controllers, Yama)

"Of the Nagas I am Ananta." Here Nagas means the manyhooded serpents, and of them the thousand-hooded Shesha. Naga is the one that has been described forming the couch of Lord Vishnu to recline in his Yoga-sleep. Lakshmi, his consort remains massaging His feet, and a Lotus rising from his sacred Navel (*nabhi*) is the seat for the creator, Brahma of the Trinity, to sit and fulfil his creation.

We have seen that Shesha or Ananta, as he is also called, is specially known as the bearer of the earth. The pre-eminence of Shesha is well-known in the story of *Palazhimathanam* when the *devas* decided to churn the ocean in order to obtain nectar and found themselves unable to move mount Meru which was to be used as their churning stick; the *devas* sought the help of Vishnu and Brahma at whose command the serpent king Ananta lifted the mountain.

It is again on the couch made by the coils of Shesha or Ananta that Lord Vishnu is said to recline, and the hood of serpent king

forms a canopy over the Lord's head. Excellent and mammoth images in stone of Mahavishnu reclining on Anantha Padmanabha can be seen at the Padmanabhaswami temple at Thiruvananthapuram, the Capital of Kerala. At Mahabalipuram, in the grand rock-cut sculpture, there is a majestic figure of the God asleep on his serpent. His head, covered with a conical mitre, which is peculiar to Pallava art, is surrounded by Ananta's hood, consisting of five snake-heads. We also find a few rare cases of Vishnu sitting in *Lalitasana* posture on the top of coiled up snake, its hood forming, as it were, a canopy over his head. An early example is the colossal rock-cut image in the verandah of Cave III at Badami (Karnataka).

Shesha Naga is also associated with the third incarnation of Varaha, at the beginning of *kalpa*, the supreme deity assuming the semblance of a gigantic boar dived into the depths of primeval waters and heaved up the planet earth from the abyss. It is said that it was serpent king Shesha who supported one of the feet of the boar while rising from the waters. The close connection of Varaha *avatara* and Adi Shesha can be seen in the rock-cut sculptures of Udayagiri (Gwalior), Mahabalipuram and in the Calcutta museum.

In the epics, the elder brother of Sri Krishna, Baladeva is said to be an incarnation of Shesha. The same thing is said about Lakshmana in the *Ramayana*. In a more ample and picturesque manner we find that Baladeva's identity with Shesha when his death is described subsequent to the destruction of the Yadava race. "Krishna found his elder brother Balarama seated alone in solitude and engaged in Yoga. Then from his mouth there issued forth a large white Naga,.....thousand-headed, red mouthed, in size like unto the girth a large mountain, who, leaving his body, sped towards the great ocean. There *sagara* received him and so did divine *nagas* and the pure holy rivers....."

It is said that Anantnag or Anantnagi in Jammu & Kashmir is connected with Shesha or Ananta.

Shesha Naga

The concept of Shesha as the 'Cosmic Serpent' is suggested in different contexts in the *Srimad Bhagavata*, and Balarama is invariably identified with the cosmic serpent that is thousand-headed. We also come across the description of Shesha in the context of the episodes of Chitaketu in the same scripture; Shesha is described as of white bodily complexion like the stalk of a lotus, with a blue upper garment and full of golden garments properly set. The identification of Balarama and the cosmic serpent is more manifest in the account of the departure of Krishna and Balarama for Mathura along with Akrura. Says Sindhu S. Dange in *The Bhagavata Purana: Mytho-Social Study*: "It is said that Akrura stopped the chariot on the bank of the river Yamuna. The two brothers stayed in the chariot and Akrura came to the pool (Hruda) of the Yamuna for a bath. He began to meditate on the highest principle and, to his surprise, he saw both these brothers sitting side by side in the water of the pool. He came to verify whether the twain were still sitting in the chariot and found them there. Returning to the pool he was amazed to see them there again; Shesha with a thousand-crowned hoods, white in complexion having the blue upper garment, while Krishna, bluish in complexion having the golden-coloured apparel."

Matsya Purana explains the nature of Shesha by saying that when all creatures are consumed by fire at the end of the Yuga, Shesha alone remains. So he is called Shesha or that which remains. Ananta literally means the endless or the infinite one.

Vasuki

It is said that while laying the foundation or setting out the ground for a new house, in the rules performed as per *Vastusashtra*, offerings are offered to the *Sarparaja* Vasuki besides gods like Indra, Vayu, Brahma, etc. Vasuki is said to preside over the nether world (Patal). In the episode of *Palazhimaibanam* (Churning of the Nectar) Vasuki functions as the churning rope. When the world was

threatened with the deadly poison of Vasuki, it was Lord Siva who swallowed it as if it had been nectar! So much so Siva came to be called Nilakantha. The role of Vasuki as the churning rope and Siva swallowing the deadly venom is depicted in some of the temples in Himachal Pradesh (the temple of Mrikula Devi in Chamba).

"The subject (the role of Vasuki in the *Palazhimathanam* episode)," says Havell, "is a favourite one in Indian art, but it was never treated on so magnificent a scale or with so splendid an effect as in the bas-reliefs which adorn the colonnades of the great temple of Angkor Vat in Cambodia built after the twelfth century by Surya Varman II, one of the last of the Hindu kings who ruled over the Indian colony in the Further East."

Whereas Shesha was associated with Vishnu, Vasuki is said to be associated with Siva as the serpent slung around the Lord's neck.

Vasuki has retained an important place in Indian folklore as is proved by the well-known legend of the Iron Pillar of Delhi. The foot of the Pillar was believed to rest on the head of the serpent-king and thereby the stability of the kingdom. Now when the incredulous king had the pillar dug up, its base was found wet with the blood of the serpent Vasuki, and it could never again be firmly fixed, and shortly afterwards, the Hindu kingdom of Delhi was conquered by the Muslim invaders.

In the valleys of the Western Himalayas, Vasuki under the name of Basaki Naga not only lives up to the present day in many a popular legend, but is also worshipped. Basaki Naga is worshipped in Chamba, more particularly in the small shrine of Hidimba which belongs to the ancient temple of Champavati Devi, one of the family deities of the erstwhile Raja of Chamba. The Kulu Valley is also a great centre of Naga worship. The popular serpent deity is Vasuki or Basaki or Basu as commonly called by the people in the valley.

The cult of Vasuki has spread far beyond the frontiers of India. In Bali (Indonesia) island, Vasuki is known as Basuki or Naga Basaki and is reckoned among the attendants of the sea god Varuna. The

The Legends and the Tradition

15

Balinese represent Basuki as a crowned giant-snake resting on the waves. The temple of Basuki is still regarded as a sacred shrine in Bali. Similarly, the inhabitants of Java too, who still know the serpent king Basuki by literary tradition must once have taken part in his worship before conversion to Islam. The town of Besaki (Basaki) situated on the northern coast of eastern Java seems still to retain the cult of Vasuki.

Takshaka

"Like the terrible great Naga, Takshaka, swelling with poison, even so is the powerful Bheeshma in battle, wrathful and sharp of weapons," goes the passage in *Bheeshma Parva* in the *Mahabharata*.

At the serpent sacrifice of Janamejaya, it was Takshaka who was the chief Naga hero. He is the most typical snake demon of the epic — poisonous, fierce and relentless. The great physician Susruta speaks of a certain drug called *Tarkshya* which will kill the poison of even Takshaka.

There is a temple dedicated to Takshaka known as Takshakeswara or Takha-ji at Navali or Naole near Indore. Here people worship him along with the great Ayurveda votary, Dhanwantari.

Other principal Nagarajas are Dhrtarashtra, Airavata (Elapatra), Karkotaka, Shankha and Mani. Karkotaka figures in the popular tale of Nala, in which he shows his gratitude to the hero of the story who saved him from the fire.

The royal family of Kashmir which included the great Lalitaditya, the founder of the Martand temple, boasts that the Naga Karkotaka was the procreator of his race. There is a shrine dedicated to Karkotaka in Barha Kutre in Banda district in UP.

Karkotaka is the most popular snake god in Nepal. It is said that when Manjusri or Lord Vishnu pierced the mountain barrier and drained the country so that all Nagas were carried away by the

rush of waters, Karkotaka alone remained. From that time he has been said to reside in the great lake called *Tau-daban* or *Tau-dab* in the south-eastern extremity of Nepal.

The Episode of the Kaliya Serpent

According to *Srimad Bhagavata*, a great devotee of Lord Krishna, Saubhari, remained submerged in the waters of Kalindi for twelve years, performing austerities. Consequently, he became very much attached to the fish that sported happily in those waters. One day he happened to see before him Garuda (the eagle who subsists on fish) hungrily eating up the fish from the river. Pained at the sight, the saint cursed Garuda to the effect that he would lose his life itself if he came to eat any creature there. At that time, the serpent Kaliya, proud of the great power of his poison, took away the offerings due to Garuda, the enemy of all serpents. Angry at this, Garuda, the votary and vehicle of Lord Vishnu, smote Kaliya with his wings, upon which Kaliya sought sanctuary in Kalindi, which was a prohibited zone for Garuda because of the saint's curse.

So deadly was the poison of Kaliya that the trees of the banks of the Kalindi dried up and even the birds flying overhead dropped dead. One day, when unaccompanied by Balarama, Krishna had gone with his cows to the woods near Yamuna. The cowherds and the cows, their throats parched in the sizzling heat of summer, slaked their thirst by drinking the poisoned river water. One by one, they fell dead, but the benign look at the Lord revived them all, seeming to drench the lifeless bodies with life-giving nectar.

Soon Krishna climbed up a Kadamba tree, its leaves withered by Kaliya's poison, and took a long leap to reach the deep cavern in midstream whose surface was covered with swirling waters. The turbulent waters of the river heaved with a roar with the weight of Krishna, inundating the bank for a hundred yards. The deafening sound and splash infuriated Kaliya who surfaced to attack Krishna. The serpent Kaliya looked a veritable mountain with peaks constituted of his numerous hoods, all giving off deadly poison. The

The Legends and the Tradition

17

fierce serpent bit Krishna all over and coiled himself around the body of Krishna tightly. The cowherds on the banks watching the blood-curdling duel were frozen to the ground with fright. Soon Krishna emerged smiling, releasing himself from the coils of the snake, and mounted on the heads of the serpent and began to dance on them. As one head of the serpent drooped down, Krishna jumped on to every raised hood. Thus he trampled hood after hood until the Kaliya bled so profusely as to redden the water of the river. As Kaliya lay exhausted, his wives surfaced and prostrated before Krishna in all humility. Kaliya too, humbled and subdued, prostrated at the feet of the Lord. The ever-forgiving Lord then asked Kaliya to go to the island of Ramanaka situated in mid-ocean and assured that Garuda, the enemy of serpents, would not attack him there. So retired Kaliya, along with others of his family, to the island.

One might ask why had Kaliya left Ramanaka, the abode of the Nagas, for the safety of Yamuna? According to *Srimad Bhagavata*, in former times, it was decided by the serpents, who were destined to be killed by Garuda, that every month on the new moon day a serpent should be given to the King of Birds as his food under a particular tree. Each serpent was observing this rule, but the Kaliya, puffed up with the power of his poison, would not relent, nor did he let others succumb to the overbearing manner of the mighty bird. So Garuda made a fierce attack on the defiant serpent who was so much frightened that he took refuge in the Yamuna which was forbidden to Garuda because of the curse of the sage Saubhari.

Serpent Worship in Kerala

Legend has it that Lord Parasurama to whom is attributed the origin of Kerala wanted to get Brahmins from elsewhere in India settled down in Kerala, but the infestation of the region by snakes and the presence of brackish water scared away the migrants. A crestfallen Parasurama went to Mount Kailash and prayed to Lord Parameswara for a solution. The Lord of the Himalayas advised him to go back to Kerala and pray to the Serpent King Vasuki. The hard penance of Parasurama moved the Serpent King who deigned to get the brackishness of the water removed and ordered the serpents to move away from human habitation to anthills and holes elsewhere. But the people of Kerala were asked by Vasuki to set apart a part of the overgrown grove in every homestead for the installation of stone images of snake gods. (These are called 'Kavus' locally). The people were asked to offer regular worship here, treating the snake gods as family deities that would bestow them the boons of progeny, wealth and prosperity. On the contrary, any disrespect shown to the snake gods or failure to perform the regular *pūja* would cause untold hardship to the family.

Parasurama agreed to abide by all the dictates of the Serpent King and soon the Brahmins were back in Kerala setting up snake shrines amidst thick foliage in their homesteads where they conducted regular prayers to mollify the snake gods. Parasurama himself installed the idols of Vasuki, Nagayakshi and other lesser snake gods at the site where he had prayed to the Serpent King. He got a few Brahmin families (Namboodiris) settled around this shrine and they were given all the rights of daily *pūja* and for the maintenance of the temple. This is the legend behind the famous Mannarasala snake temple near the Subramanya Swamy temple in Haripad in the

Serpent Worship in Kerala

19

Kartikapally Taluk in Alleppey District in Kerala. The site of the temple is said to be part of the Khandava forest which was set ablaze by the Pandava warrior Arjuna. So much so the place came to be known as 'Chuttanad' (the scorched land) and later called as Kuttanad. Fearing the blaze from the spreading forest fire would destroy the snake shrine, the Namboodiri women kept on cooling the environs of the shrine with the water taken from the nearby tank. Nevertheless, the devastating forest fire made the land around hot and the serpents around wriggled in pain. But soon all was over and the heat abated and someone said that the 'land has cooled' (In Malayalam 'Mannari' which later corrupted into 'Mannarasala').

Mannarasala Temple

Long ago a couple came to Mannarasala to pray for progeny, offering regular prayers and *pūja*. Soon the woman became pregnant and in course of time gave birth to two sons, one of which was a serpent which soon spoke thus: "Mother! Serpents in and around this place adore the families here, more particularly, the women who took special care to save them from the forest fires. So I appeal to you that from now on all the *pūjas* in the snake shrine should be conducted by the eldest among the female members of family. But the chosen priestess, from the day she is anointed, should scrupulously observe the vow of *brahmacharya* (celebacy), even if she were married. Now my mother will take over as the priestess and as you grow old and infirm you will hand over your duties to the next seniormost woman in the household, passing on the advice in regard to the ceremonies of daily *pūja*; this process of transfer of power and responsibilities should go from generation to generation".

So saying the child serpent is said to have installed himself in one of the interiors of the Namboodiri house. Believe it or not, the old tradition of the eldest woman of the family conducting the *pūjas* at the famous Mannarasala temple continues right to this day.

The interior room where the child serpent entered was seldom opened by the members of the Namboodiri household. Only an anthill could be noticed there. The boy who was born along with the serpent grew up into a great devotee who set up a full-fledged temple where the images of Nagaraja and Nagayakshi were duly installed and consecrated. This temple at Mannarasala was periodically renovated, but the idols were kept intact.

The snake shrine in Mannarasala enjoys a pride of place among the votaries of the snake cult in India. True to the hoary tradition, devotees come here for daily worship and for the fulfilment of vows taken long before. But the most important days for the temple and its visitors are the days of Ayilyam star in the Malayalam months of Kanni and Thulam (September-October) when thousands upon thousands devotees converge on this temple. The highlights on the eve of the grand carnival are the community feasts. The idols of Nagaraja and Nagayakshi are taken in procession and are offered special *puja* by the priestess. The snake gods are offered milk and mixture of turmeric and rice powder.



A labyrinthine serpent design adorning the floor of the site of Yagya. India apart, in many other countries the serpent has been worshipped as a symbol of water, longevity of wisdom - perhaps because of its wiggling movement, renewal after sloughing its skin and unblinking stare.



A view of the entrance to the Nagaraja temple at Mannarasala in Kerala. This is one of the few surviving snake shrines still enjoying a pride of place among the votaries of the snake cult in India.



A view of the snake sbrine at Mannarasala. The daily rituals and ceremonies of the temple are performed by a priestess, a rare phenomenon in India.



Stone images of the cobra at the Mannarasala shrine set in a sylvan backdrop, typical of Kerala.



Krishna on the Kaliya serpent at a lotus pond at Bodh Gaya temple in Bihar.

The present priestess of the snake shrine in Mannarasala is 85 years old. According to another tradition the wife of the eldest male in the *Illam* (Namboodiri household) is usually anointed as the priestess or what is called 'Mannarasa Amma'. She is supposed to take the vow of celibacy thereafter. Savithri Antharjanam, the present priestess, had got married at the age of 13 and had become a mother at the age of 15 and thereafter has been living the life of *brahmacharinee*.

Several kinds of offerings are made to the snake deities here. Those desiring to have progeny present a bell-metal vessel to the temple; the vessel is taken to the sanctum sanctorum where it is kept the inverted way. Six months after a child is born, the couple come to the temple, and after prayers and *pujas*, in fulfilment of the vows already taken, the vessel is brought to the upright position. Other offerings made to the snake deity include milk, turmeric and rice powder, *Sarpabali* and the like. Yet another kind of unusual offering is made to assuage the wrath of the snake god and usher in a period of prosperity by arranging a song sequence by the Pulluva couple which is popularly known as "Pulluvan Pattu". This prerogative is enjoyed by a particular Pulluva family residing near Mannarasala.

Apart from the Ayilyam star festivals in the months of September and October, festivals also take place on the Ayilyam star day in the Malayalam month of Kumbhom (said to be the month of the birth of the child serpent) and on Sivaratri day (since serpents adorned the neck of Nilakantha) at the Mannarasala shrine.

Mannarasala is perhaps the only temple in India where the rites and rituals are conducted by a priestess.

In almost all parts of Kerala the serpent is deified and offerings are offered to the granite images of serpents installed on the stone platform built afoot the huge pipal tree in the precincts of every temple; devotees circumambulate this platform during every visit to the main temple. *Sarpakavu* is a familiar phenomenon on the countryside in Kerala even today; the *Kavu* is a separate spot set

apart as the abode of the snake deities in every house compound. The *Kavu* is invariably overgrown with trees of various kinds, shrubs and even medicinal plants. A bridle-path leads one to the *Kavu* wherein is installed images of snake gods. The place is scrupulously guarded and even domestic animals are not allowed to stray in. The trees of the *Kavu* are never felled. It is the Namboodiri priests who are engaged to do the *pujas* at *Kavus*.

We have made a reference to the ceremony of *Pampinbullal* performed to propitiate snake gods. The ceremony is performed by Nairs at the courtyard where certain square figures are drawn, one inside another, all in colours of red, white, black, etc. Ordinary rice flour, and flour mixed with lime and turmeric powder and burnt paddy husk are chiefly employed for making the figures. Also arranged at the ceremony site are lamps, coconuts, paddy and rice; and as the priest recites the *mantras* and sings the hymns, all in praise of the snake gods, the gods are propitiated as symbolised by the movement of the bodies of women specially chosen to represent the serpent power after a period of abstinence. The women dance and whirl as if possessed, and their utterances in the near state of trance are reckoned as the word of God.

Pampumekkattumana

In the heart of Central Kerala, about eight miles from Chalakudy on the way to Mala in the deep-wooded countryside in Trichur district is a five-century old snake shrine, the Pampumekkattumana, mentioned earlier. The shrine, with its presiding deity, Nagayakshi, is managed by the Pampumekkattu Namboodiri family whose head is regarded as the high pontiff of snake worship in Kerala. The Namboodiris and his delegates enjoy the prerogative of removing *Sarpakavu* from one place to another. The family of Pampumekkattu Namboodiri exercises effective control over the snakes in general.

Once upon a time the precincts of Pampumekkattumana proliferated in the crawling reptiles, and even today no snake near

Serpent Worship in Kerala

23

about the jungle around would dare bite the members of the priest's household. Such is the spell they hold over the snakes. It is also believed that the Namboodiri household and its treasures are guarded by snakes from thieves and others. The belief is widely held that anyone bitten by snake can be cured of the deadly poison if the victim's kith and kin decide to take him or her straight to Pampumekkattumana. A forty-one day festival is held in this shrine every November-December with offerings of milk to the deities in the three serpent groves in the Pampumekkattumana. The priestly family believes that the serpents could be sighted in times of weal and woe and whenever the purity of the shrine is violated. There is another festival held every April. One of the key features of the festival is the *Sarpapattu* (songs in praise of the snake god) rendered by the Namboodiri women of the priestly order.

Devout people say that none should try to test the power or whereabouts of the snakes here in Pampumekkattumana. It is said that once a foreigner, just out of curiosity, expressed a desire to see the snakes. The Namboodiri priest suggested that he should not try to test the power of the snake god. But the visitor was adamant. Thereupon the priest asked the visitor to look into the *Kavu* with his one eye closed. Immediately, as if by magic, the bewildered visitor saw any number of cobras hissing and dancing in gay abandon with their hoods well spread. As he opened his left eye, he had the shock of his life; he had lost sight of the left eye.

Offerings to the snake deity in Pampumekkattumana, people believe, would eliminate the curse of sterility and cure people of skin diseases.

An interesting story is woven around the origin of the snake shrine in Pampumekkattumana. The pious Namboodiri family in Pampumekkattumana was in deep financial straits and the head of the family went all the way to the historic Thiruvanchikulam Temple in Kodungalloor to offer prayers to the presiding deity in order to free himself from the dehumanising cycle of poverty. The poor Namboodiri thus prayed for twelve long years at Thiruvanchikulam

and at the end of the twelfth year of the penance, as the Namboodiri was descending the flight of stairs to take a vesselsful of water from the temple tank, he beheld a seraphic personality on the steps. The sight nearly took his breath away. "What on earth will you get if you know who I am?"

The Namboodiri couldn't believe his eyes and stood on transfixed gazing at the figure which looked heavenly. Suddenly his gaze fell on the blinding radiance issuing from the seraph's hand. Instinctively he asked :

"May I know what is that brilliant thing !"

"Mekkad! (that was the name of the Namboodiri) Have you ever seen the ruby stone?"

When the Namboodiri confessed he did not, the stranger handed over the precious stone on condition that he should return it the same night. Namboodiri was overwhelmed and rushed with the precious stone to his friend, the Chieftain of Kodungalloor who wished to buy the stone at any cost.

"But, sorry, Thampuran! I have to keep the word that I would return the ruby intact to the one who gave me."

The chieftain returned the ruby reluctantly and the Namboodiri rushed back to the tank side and handed over the stone to the waiting stranger who disappeared the moment he accepted the stone. Namboodiri was nonplussed and returned with the vessel of water. He felt sad that he could not recognise the great saintly figure.

The Namboodiri slept a sleepless night and the next day when, as usual, he reached the temple tank, he beheld the same saintly figure. On the persistent entreaty of the Namboodiri the stranger revealed his identity: the stranger was none other than the Serpent King Vasuki who condescended to free the Namboodiri family from its chronic poverty on the completion of the 12-year penance of the Namboodiri at the Thiruvanchikulam Temple.

Serpent Worship in Kerala

25

Back home, as the Mekkad Namboodiri, after his bath and ablutions, was about to remove his palmyra-leaf umbrella, he saw a snake coiled up atop his umbrella. He flinched back, pale with fear, but became calm as he heard:

"Do not fear! I am King Vasuki. Lord Parameswara is pleased by your honesty and devotion and he has sent me here. Here is the ruby I showed you the other day. Let it be here and you will be rid of your poverty for ever." As he handed over the stone to the Namboodiri, King Vasuki reminded him: "Soon Nagayakshi will come hither and bless you!"

As the consort of the Namboodiri returned home after joining in the feast of a relative of hers, she also kept her umbrella on the verandah. Soon a snake emerged from under the umbrella and took the form of a beautiful celestial maiden. King Vasuki said: "Mekkad! You should get installed the idols of Nagaraja and Nagayakshi at the easternmost portion of your house and treat them as your family deities, offering regular *pujas* which would ensure uninterrupted prosperity for your family. Soon, the environs here would be full of snakes, but don't get upset on any score. The snakes will take care of themselves in the dense jungle around here. The snakes won't harm anyone here."

Soon the snake shrine and the name of the Pampu (Snake) Mekkatu Namboodiri became known all over Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu. Believers came here for treatment of skin diseases. The Namboodiri was even invited by the Pandya King in Tamil Nadu for the treatment of skin diseases. Way back home after successfully treating the Pandya King, the Namboodiri halted for a while at the present Nagercoil in South Travancore. Here he and his family saw a weeping low-caste woman with stacks of grass around her.

"Here I am living on the earnings from the sale of grass, and today in the clump of high grass, as I raised and struck my sickle, blood started coming from a stone image. I don't know what it is about..." And the poor grass-cutter started sobbing. Mekkad Nam-

boodiri rushed to the spot indicated by the woman and there he saw a beautiful stone idol of a five-hooded serpent. Soon, thanks to the initiative of the Namboodiri and the local people a temple under a thatched shed was built and the place came to be called 'Nagarkovil' or Nagercoil, the present headquarters of the Kanyakumari District in Tamil Nadu. (The devotees at the Nagaram-mankoil in Nagercoil are given red sand as 'prasad', said to be an antidote to skin diseases). Soon idols of Lord Vishnu and Sivalinga were installed at the temple. Even today the head of the Pampumek-kattu Namboodiri family is specially invited for the ten-day Ayilyam festival conducted in the month of Meenam at this temple in Nagercoil.

The Omnipresence of Serpent Cult

In the north-western part of the city of Varanasi there is an ancient well, called *Nag Kuan* (*Nag kupa*). This ancient well is dedicated to the Nagaraja Ananta or Shesha who is believed to have incarnated himself as Patanjali, the famous grammarian and author of *Mahabbasbya*. On that account the grammarians of the city gather on this spot and discuss grammar on the 5th of the bright half of the month of *Savan*. This is the date of Naga Panchami or Festival of Snakes.

Long back, there was a temple of Vasuki at Prayag or Allahabad. "The temple is beautifully situated amidst a grove of trees, overlooking the Ganga, which flows just under it. The scenery is charming. It is a massive building on an elevated terrace.... The image of Naga Vasuki is carved out of a black stone set in the front wall of the temple, and is about a foot and a half high. It is neatly sculptured as a hooded snake standing erect when enraged..."

On Naga Panchami Day pilgrims from the neighbouring villages used to come here "to secure the double benefit of bathing in the sacred stream and worshipping the serpent god on the auspicious occasion. The temple is resorted by every pilgrim to Prayag with whom it is a belief that the merit of bathing in the sacred confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna is not complete until he visits the temple of the King of Serpents. Pilgrims to other sacred places in India take Ganga water from this place only, as it is considered purer than elsewhere in Prayag."

In Garhwal, there exists a universal tradition that Nagas once resided in the Valley of Alaknanda. At present Shesha Naga is

honoured at Pandukeswar, Bhekal Nag at Ratgaon, Banpur Nag at Margaon and Pushkara Nag at Nagnath in Nagpur.

In Gujarat, Kathiawar is a great centre of serpent worship. There are temples of Vasuki and his brother Vanduk, locally called Vasangji and Bandia Beli at Than and Mandogarh. The two Naga brothers are said to have settled here after having rid the country of the demon Bhimasur at the request of five famous Rishis. No one is allowed to cut a tree in the grove that surrounds Bandia Beli's shrine.

The Vasuki temple at Than contains the image of a three-headed cobra with two smaller monocephalous ones, one on each side carved on the same slab. There is also a figure of Lord Vishnu here.

But the most famous snake temple of Gujarat is that of the celebrated Dharanidhara or 'Earthholder' situated in the village Dhama, a few kilometres to the north-west of Tharad in North Gujarat. This shrine is visited by people from all over Gujarat. There is a well-executed image of a cobra in the temples of Dhim Nag as the Dharanidhara is locally called.

Snake Goddess Manasa Devi

In Bengal the snake goddess Manasa Devi is widely worshipped. There is a popular legend surrounding the worship of this snake goddess. There was a merchant called Chand Saudagar, a great devotee of Siva, who would not worship any god or goddess other than Siva, come what may. He regarded the snakes as his enemy and prohibited the worship of Manasa in his domain. The enraged goddess got all the six children of the merchant killed, but Chand was totally unmoved. He would pray to Siva only.

Chand Saudagar put his merchandise in fourteen well-laden boats and set sail on the sea. Manasa appeared in mid-ocean and told the merchant that unless he worshipped her, endless troubles

The Omnipresence of the Serpent Cult

29

would overtake him. The merchant was stubborn in his resolve. Manasa raised a furious storm and totally destroyed his merchandise. Chand could save himself with great difficulty and swam out to the shore. He spent twelve long years in stark poverty in a foreign country and then returned to his own country.

Soon a son was born to him. Happiness soon gave way to abysmal despair when it was predicted that his son Lakhinder would die of snake bite in the bridal chamber. Chand took the precaution of building a bridal room fortified by iron. He got his son married to one Behula and put them in the iron room. But who on earth could checkmate the ruthless forces of destiny? A snake entered through a hole in the supposedly well-protected chamber and Lakhinder died of snake bite. Everyone was beside himself or herself with uncontrollable grief, but Behula remained unmoved. She wanted to convert the calamity that befell her into a blessing. She ignored the opposition of the people and floated on a raft with her husband's body. Days and nights passed. The body underwent decomposition and dissolution. All that remained were the bones, but Behula's raft floated on. The legend says that after six long months the raft reached heaven, and with the help of a washerman, Behula reached the assembly of gods. She pleased the gods with her singing and dancing, and got back the lives of her husband and his six elder brothers. Gratified, she returned home with all of them and worshipped Manasa with all devotion. At her request, Chand Saudgar dedicated a flower to Manasa with his left hand. Thus was introduced the worship of the snake goddess Manasa.

The Behula-Lakhinder story has enthralled generation after generation of people in Bengal as an example of the love between husband and wife. The last night of Sravana and the first day of Bhadra witness a festival dedicated to Manasa. Dwija Banshidas of Mymensingh town in the present Bangladesh has written poetry on this festival. Farmers in Bengal take a day off from the sowing season to celebrate the immortal conjugal love of Behula and Lakhinder. The festival is celebrated long before Durga Puja.

The Water Spirits of Lakes and Rivers

The Kashmir chronicler Kalhana, the author of the famous *Rajatarangini*, gives a graphic account of the spell the snake gods had held over the people of the Kashmir Valley. The Nagas were popular deities and the people held them in great awe and veneration. Nagas were believed to be the water spirits inhabiting lakes and springs, who, when duly propitiated, granted timely rain for the crops. But, when roused to anger, they caused hailstorm, heavy snowfall and disastrous floods. Down to the present day, the word *nag* is used in Kashmir to indicate the source of a river or rivulet.

At the outset of his narration Kalhana says that Kashmir has offered sanctuary to the Nagas against the attack of Garuda, their sworn enemy. Among the Nagas he mentions Shankha and Padma of which the latter appears to be identical with Mahapadma, the tutelary spirit of the great Wular Lake which occupies a central position in Kashmir Valley. This lake, through which the Jhelum flows, is mentioned in ancient chronicles by the Sanskrit name, Mahapadma saras or Padmanaga saras. However, according to *Rajatarangini*, the chief guardian of the Valley is not Padma, but Nila, who lives in Neelakunda or the main source of Jhelum.

According to Kalhana, during the ascendancy of Buddhism when the worship of Nagas was neglected, the Valley was scourged by heavy snowfall and calamitous floods, with all the destruction in their trail. People were spared the agony of further suffering only after the Brahmins intervened to propitiate the snake god Nila.

There is a popular legend that at the request of Kashyapa, gods came to Kashmir to fight with the water demons who infested the big lakes and caused great havoc in the Valley. Balarama, at the behest of Vishnu, clove the Himalayas with his weapon, the plough-share, and thus drained the entire Valley. The wicked demon then killed by Lord Balarama is known as *Vernag*.

The people of Kashmir believe that the serpent god lives in his subterranean palace somewhere in Kashmir and it was here that the

The Omnipresence of the Serpent Cult

31

Brahmin devotee Chandradeva spent six months of chilly season and was initiated by his host into the sacred rites to be observed by those living in Kashmir. In later times, the sacred fount of Nila became known as Ver Nag. The Mughal historian Abul-Fazl says: "In the Ver tract of country is the source of Bihat (also called Vitasta or Jhelum). It is a pool measuring a *jarib*, which tosses in foam and an astonishing roar, and its depth is unfathomable. It goes by the name of Ver Nag and is surrounded by a stone embankment, and to its east are temples of stone."

The town of Anantnag in Kashmir derives its name from Ananta or Shesha. The abode of Ananta is a great spring which issues at the southern end of the town.

It is believed that Takshaka, the Nagaraja, was also worshipped in Kashmir. According to the long account of the chief places of pilgrimage (*Tirthayatra parvam* in the *Mahabharata*) the river Vitasta (Jhelum) is said to be the abode of Takshaka.

The Kashmiri historian Kalhana speaks of the annual festival in honour of the great Nagaraja Takshaka, "frequented by the dancers and strolling players and thronged by crowds of spectators." It took place on 12th day of the waning moon of Jyeshtha, the first month of summer (Greeshma).

In Himachal Pradesh some of the ancient Naga temples are situated in a clump of cedar or deodar (the *Devadaru* or tree of the gods as called in Sanskrit, growing in the Himalayas at a height of 6,000 to 10,000 feet above sea level) trees, not far from the villages. Often the temple is associated with a lake or spring. The trees of the sacred grove are usually not felled and are regarded as the property of the deity residing in their midst.

The construction of a snake shrine is extremely simple. The temple consists of a small square cell raised on a plinth of heavy timber built of rough stone alternating with wooden beams. This is covered by a sloping or conical roof slates or shingles, supported on wooden pillars, forming a verandah round the shrine. This type

of shrine associated with snake and Devi worship represents the earliest style of temple architecture in the Himalayas.

The timber-work, especially round the doorway, is often decorated with quaint carvings, in which rough effigies of snakes are most prominent.

In the plains of the Punjab real serpent worship must have existed even at the time of Alexander the Great. It can still be traced in popular religion and folklore. In Gurudaspur District, a festival is held in the month of *Savan* at which village girls go out together to some pond or stream, taking some sweat bread with them and there they eat, sing and swing. Here is a custom originating from the worship of Nagas at the commencement of the rainy season.

The Kinsman of the Nagas

In South India snake-slabs or *Naga-kals* are a common sight in the temples. Often a childless woman makes a vow to install a snake idol or *Nagapratishtha* if she is blessed with a child. The usual practice is to have the figure of a cobra carved on a slab, to place it in a well for six months in order to imbue it with life (*Pranapratishtha*) by means of *mantras* and certain ceremonies and then to set it up under a pipal tree. A platform is built around the tree which is worshipped. It is believed that a woman will obtain children if she walks around the tree 108 times daily for 45 days consecutively. (The pipal tree is called *Aswatha* in Sanskrit and is called *Nagabandhu* or the 'Kinsman of the Nagas, and the number 108 is regarded as an auspicious number).

There are varieties of *Naga-kals*. A few exhibit a single cobra, showing, as it were, on the top of his tail and curling upward with expanded hood. Usually the cobra is carved in relief on a stone slab, some four feet in height. At Adichanallur in Tirunelveli District there is a large group of *Naga-kals* with snakes carved in the round. The snakes are either single-hooded or many-hooded, and several of the latter have a little human figure seated on the coils and over-

The Omnipresence of the Serpent Cult

33

shadowed by the serpentine hood. The figure is said to represent Krishna or it must be representing the wish of those who have taken the vow for getting a child.

A very popular form of religion, and one which prevailed particularly during the Vijayanagar period, was the worship of trees and snakes. We know from the inscriptions that although the Vijayanagar kings built innumerable temples in honour of Siva and Vishnu, they gave particular prominence to their family or tutelary deity Virupaksha (said to be another form of Lord Siva), and it seems certain that the first temple which they built, or otherwise acquired at Hampi in 1336, was dedicated to Virupaksha. In his original form, Virupaksha was regarded as the Lord of the Nagas, the king who ruled over the western quarter of the great Vijayanagar Empire. In the old Buddhist legends, the Nagas are fabled to reside under the Trikuta rocks supporting Mount Meru, and also in the waters of springs, lakes and rivers, watching over great treasures, causing rain, certain maladies, and having the power of bestowing offspring on women desiring children.

It is the Naga or hooded cobra alone that is sacred, and he is generally worshipped on the *Nagula Chaviti*, or the fourth day of the bright fortnight in the month of Sravana (July-August), when women fast and pour milk over the *Naga-kals* (snake-stones) or over anthills in which cobras are believed to reside. This day is regarded as a great festival day and a vow is taken by a childless woman to install a *Naga-kal* (snake-stone) if they are blessed with children. The ceremony consists in having the figure of a cobra carved upon a small stone slab, placing it in water for six months, "giving it life" (*pranapratishta*), by reciting *mantras* and other ceremonies over it, and then setting it up under a sacred pipal tree or margosa tree, or for preference, under the shade of a pipal tree that has been "married" to a margosa tree. These two trees are often placed together, "married", — as the saying goes — on a raised platform and worshipped by devotees.

The women devotees of the serpent god in Vijayanagar not only set up *Naga-kals* in temples, but had their Naga goddess which they worshipped. In the north-east corner of the so-called underground temple in the ruins of Hampi, the fabulous capital of the Vijayanagar Empire, one will find a number of *Naga-kals* set up by women in fulfilment of their vows. At Kamalpur near Hampi can be seen a carved stone image of a female Naga. The floriated aureola above the female Naga's head, the two female attendants, and the fact the Naga is carved on a pedestal clearly indicates that it represents an image specially designed as an object of worship and not as a mere *Naga-kal*. The image appears to represent a veritable queen mother of Nagas, and just the type of figure the Hindu sculptor might be expected to create if he were called upon to execute an image representing the consort of Virupaksha in his original form as the Lord of the Nagas. The image of the female Naga was recovered from somewhere near the Kodanda Rama temple near Hampi.

Trees and serpent worship have created many decorative emblems in art such as five-headed and seven-headed serpents, designs representing interlaced serpents resembling wickerwork, and representations of sacred trees and flowers. Bas-relief sculptures depicting Krishna killing a large serpent by crushing its head with his heel; the same god playing on his flute protected from the sun or rain, by a huge many-headed cobra and several other scenes in which the serpent is introduced may be observed in the carvings upon the walls and pillars of many of the temples at Hampi.

Snake stones in which the serpent deity appeared in a different form, the upper half being human and the lower half serpentine, have been found in the ruins in Hampi. People believe it to be the serpent goddess Mudama. Over her head she wears the usual hood combined of three, five or seven snakes' head. She holds both hands joined in front of her breast, and in each she has a baby snake.

The worship of Naga or the serpent god has been widely prevalent in coastal Karnataka since time immemorial. The Hindus

offer prayers at the *Naga Kallu* (Effigies of Nagas) placed at the foot of the pipal trees (*Naga bana*), especially on Naga Panchami day. These are found all over South Kanara district including the Tulu speaking region of Kasargod Taluk in the Cannanore District of Kerala. The figures of the serpent are drawn with the powders of rice, turmeric and charcoal.

Naga is closely associated with Vishnu, Siva and Ganapati and the Jaina Tirthankaras. In the Vijayanagar period, Siva was considered to be the Lord of Naganatha. The figures of serpents are carved in the Jain *basadis*: Mudabidre, Karkala, Gerasoppe and Bhatkal indicating the influence of the snake worship on the Jains of Karnataka.

Naga and Subramanya

In the eighteenth century a distinct change took place regarding the very concept of the Naga worship, i.e., the identification with Lord Subramanya. We get a clue in this regard from *Subramanya Mahime*, supposed to have been composed in the eighteenth century. The work avers that Vasuki, one of the Nagarajas, performed severe penance to please Subramanya. The latter was so much pleased that he gave a portion of his divine power to the former.

The most prominent centres of Naga worship in Karnataka at present are the places of Subramanya worship such as Kukke Subramanya, Kattu Kukke, Manjeswara Kandavara, Betupadi, etc., in the Kasargod Taluk of Cannanore District in Kerala and South Kanara. In the village of Arabi near Suralu (Udupi Taluk) and in Kirimanjeswara (Coondapur Taluk) are a quaint people called *Dakke* or *Vaidyas*, who are reputed masters of the snake lore. They play a leading role in the *Naga Mandala*, performed to propitiate the snake god to beget children, cure oneself of skin diseases and to absolve oneself of any curse from Subramanya or Naga deity. The *Naga Mandala* is a ritual dance offered to Naga or Subramanya. It is an elaborate and colourful ritual when a priest in trance dances round an arena to the accompaniment of music. The arena itself is

elaborately decorated with beautiful Rangavalli (art work on floor prepared by sprinkling of powdered colours).

At the Anekal town, 30 kilometres south-east of Bangalore there is a collection of twenty *Naga-kals* set up in a garden near the local tank.

At Naga-thirtha in Kumpta Taluk, North Kanara district, there is a well-built tank around which are small artificial caves containing thousands of serpent images.

There is a famous snake shrine crowning the Pushpagiri or the Subramanya Hill in the verdured Western Ghats in South Kanara. From Mercara, this mountain peak, 5622 feet above sea level, looks like a gigantic bullock hump. The presiding deity of this hill shrine is Subbaraya, the Nagaraja, and the festival which draws large crowds in December is known as Subbaraya Shastri. People who have taken a vow roll in the precincts of the temple. A big feast and a cattle fair are highlights of the festival. The *prasad* distributed by the priest is mostly earth dug out of the hole inhabited by snakes and the earth is said to possess miraculous powers to cure people of their skin diseases and women of their 'sterile curse'.

The east coast town of Nagapattanam in Tamil Nadu is said to derive its name from Nagaraatha, the presiding deity of the local temple.

In Uttar Pradesh, at the village of Baldeo, on the left bank of the Yamuna river, twelve kilometres south-east of the holy city of Mathura, there stands a temple dedicated to Balarama or Baladeva. The stone idol of Baladeva worshipped in the temple is undoubtedly an ancient Naga image, said to have been recovered from a neighbouring tank. The image is nearly life-size and has the characteristics of the Naga figures of the Kushan period.

Festivals For The Snake God

Festivals are part of the great Hindu tradition and where there are temples, annual festivals are big draw of devotees who take part in the special *pujas* and festivities organised in these temples. Apart from the different festivals organised in different snake shrines in India, there are all-India festivals celebrated by different people to propitiate the snake god.

One of the great festivals in honour of the serpents is Naga Panchami celebrated on the fifth day of the bright fortnight (the period of the waxing moon) of the month of Sravana (*Savan*). The rites and rituals to be observed on that day are laid down in the Sanskrit work called *Vrataraaja* extracted from *Hemadri*. "In the month of Sravana, on the fifth day of the bright fortnight, the poisonous one must be drawn with cowdung on both sides of the door.... This has been declared to be a very holy day."

On the fourth day (i.e., the preceding day) people must take only one meal and on the day itself only at night. One should make a Naga of silver, wood, earth, turmeric or sandal or cause five serpents to be drawn. On the fifth day they should be worshipped with parched grain and with *panchamrit* – five nectars (milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar) – with flowers of the oleander, jasmine, the red lotus, likewise with sandal powder and other incense. The most well-known in the snake pantheon like Ananta or Shesha Naga, Vasuki and Karkotaka are worshipped on this day. As usual with all Hindu festivities, a grand feast is arranged as one of the highlights of the festival. People also take care to see that no digging takes place by day or night in the course of the festival.

In Tamil Nadu cobras are believed to bestow good luck and prosperity if they are worshipped. On Naga Panchami day every year, Hindu women take a holy bath in the morning and worship the cobras with offerings of milk and honey. Just as in Kerala, here in Tamil Nadu too it is believed that the curse of sterility can be exorcised by worshipping the snake god. Women worship the snake idols installed under the pipal tree, smear them with sandal paste, turmeric powder and *kum kum*. They go around the tree 108 times known as *Aswatha Pradakshina*. Vedic Brahmins officiate at this ceremony. Once the woman becomes a mother, she installs a granite snake idol under the tree.

Naga Panchami

There are instances where cobras are said to have performed miracles. These cobras do not harm the devotees, crawl at the fixed hour to drink milk offered to them by the housewife. This ceremony is known as *Vazhum pampu* in Tamil Nadu. Cobra worship is offered by drawing the figure of the snake on the walls of the houses. The hood is decorated with yellow sandal paste, turmeric, and *kum kum*, and offerings are made to it. The places where a cobra is found, its abode or anthill is decorated with turmeric and *kum kum* and milk is poured into it. The snake charmers go about with trained cobras and collect money.

Children born after the observance of Naga Panchami are named Nagaraja or Nagamani in Tamil Nadu.

In the Himalayan region the festival of Naga Panchami is known as 'Rikhi Panchami' or 'Biruri Panchami' since Rikheswara has now become the title of Lord Siva as the Lord of Nagas, a form in which he is represented as surrounded by serpents and crowned with the chaplet of hooded snakes.

On the day of the Naga Panchami feast, the people paint figures of serpents and birds on the walls of their houses, and seven days before the festival, they steep a mixture of wheat, gram and pulse in

Festivals for the Snake God

39

water. On the morning of the feast, they take a wisp of grass, tie it up in the form of snake, dip it in the water in which the gram has been steeped, and offer it with money and sweetmeat to the serpents.

After the Diwali in Kangra in Himachal Pradesh, a festival is held to bid goodbye to the snakes, at which an image of the Naga made of cowdung is worshipped. If a snake is seen after this, it is called 'ungrateful', and killed.

In Garhwal, the ground is freely smeared with cowdung and mud and figures of five, seven or nine serpents are rudely drawn with sandalwood paste or turmeric; incense is burnt and food and fruits are offered to the snake god. These observances take place both morning and evening, and the night is spent by the devotees listening to the stories in praise of serpent gods.

In certain parts of North-Western India Naga Panchami is celebrated along with what is called Gauri festival when offerings are made by women to Naga Devata. Girls let dolls float in the water of some river or tank, and the village boys beat the dolls with long switches specially cut for this purpose. There is a legend behind this ceremony. When Raja Janamejaya held the *sarpayajna* in order to destroy Takshaka, the king of serpents, all the snakes were captured by spells and killed. But Takshaka escaped and took refuge with Indra on whose throne he seated himself in the guise of a mosquito. Indra was asked to produce the fugitive, but he prayed for the life of his refugee which was granted on the condition that Takshaka would be banished from the land. The Serpent King took the form of a Brahmin and retired to the mountains where he got married. As time passed he unburdened his secret to his wife who could hardly keep it. At last the word reached Janamejaya who sentenced Takshaka to death. An infuriated Takshaka wanted the king Janamejaya to order every man to kill his wife to avenge his wife's treachery. Janamejaya consulted the Brahmins and finally it was proclaimed that on Naga Panchami day, every woman should make a doll and

offer it up as a vicarious sacrifice of herself, all in order to prove her devotion to her husband.

In Nepal, Naga Panchami is observed as the anniversary of the epic battle between a famous Naga and Garuda. Here in Nepal too, multi-headed cobra figures are drawn on the walls and worshipped. Accordingly, in certain parts of India, along with Naga Panchami Garuda Panchami is also observed as Garuda is the King of Kites and is the sworn enemy of the cobras. It is believed that by observing Garuda Panchami one can protect oneself from snake bite. On Garuda Panchami day sisters and brothers exchange gifts.

In Bihar, Naga Panchami is observed for about fifteen days. Images of the snake god are made out of wheat and rice and villagers go about singing folk songs. After *puja*, the images are buried with molasses and milk. Another highlight of the festival is the village fair.

Excavations in Bihar have unearthed stone images of snakes with hoods and many heads.

In Karnataka, both Naga Chaturthi and Naga Panchami festivals are celebrated on the fourth or fifth day of the month of Sravana. Women observe fast on the Chaturthi for the well-being of their family, more particularly for that of their brothers. On either side of the threshold of the house, the figure of a serpent with its little babies is drawn with turmeric paste. The main doorstep is also decorated with different figures of serpents in *rangoli*. On both days the serpent god is worshipped with women offering prayers and *pujas* to the silver or brass figures of serpents. In cities and villages, women go to the nearby anthill and offer puffed rice, bengal gram, ghee, milk, jaggery, salt, flowers, etc. A special sweet dish of puffed rice and milk is prepared at home and distributed among the members of the family.

The Agarwala banyas who claim that they are descended from the Serpent King Vasuki perform a special rite in honour of Astika Muni, said to have been an instructor of Vasuki. They bathe and draw figures of snakes on the wall of the house, which they worship,

Festivals for the Snake God

41

feed the Brahmins and perform *arti*. Each woman takes home with her some of the sesames offered to the Snake, which they sprinkle with the recitation of a spell in their houses as a means of driving away venomous reptiles.

No Ploughing on Naga Panchami

In some parts of the country the farmers refrain from ploughing the fields on Naga Panchami day out of the fear that the sharp head of the plough might kill the cobras that would be in the fields to kill rats. There is a story that gives substance to this belief. Once a farmer was busy ploughing his fields and his plough came into contact with a hole in which lived a few snakes resulting in their death. When the mother snake returned, she found that all her children had been killed. The mother snake saw blood stains on the tip of the plough and found out the cause of her children's death. She avenged the death of her children by killing, one by one, all the members of the farmer's family except the farmer's daughter who was living in a far-away place. The mother's thirst for revenge was unmitigated and she went all the way to the village where the farmer's daughter lived. But there the mother snake saw the preparations for snake worship going on, and narrated to her all that happened in her father's house. The farmer's daughter felt sorry for what had happened and requested the mother serpent to restore the lives of her relatives. The mother snake felt penitent and anger being cooled down, gave the farmer's daughter a vessel of nectar, with instruction to sprinkle it on the heads of people died of bite. The farmer's daughter went to her father's house where the bodies had been kept awaiting her arrival, and she sprinkled the nectar on their heads. All the dead woke up as if from sleep.

It would be relevant here to quote a powerful poem on Naga Panchami by the immortal poetess of India, Sarojini Naidu:

The Festival of Serpents

Shining ones awake, we seek your chosen temples
In caves and sheltering sandhills and sacred banyan roots;
O lift your dreaming heads from their trance of ageless wisdom
And weave your mystic measures to the melody of the flute.

We bring you milk and maize, wild figs and golden honey,
And kindle fragrant incense to hallow all the air
With fasting lips we pray, with fervent hearts we praise you
O bless our lowly offerings and hearken to our prayer.

Guard our helpless lives and guide our patient labour
And cherish our dear vision like the jewels in your crests;
O spread your hooded watch for the safety of our slumbers,
And soothe the troubled longings that clamour in our breasts.

Swift ye are as streams and soundless as the dewfall
Subtle as the lightning and splendid as the sun;
Seers are ye and symbols of the ancient silence,
Where life and death and sorrow and ecstasy are one.

"The Bird of Time"

Snake Cult In Art

The wider acceptance of serpent worship in different parts of India is very much reflected in the exquisite pieces of sculpture. These cover three categories; first, the form of serpents, usually many-headed; second, the human form universally characterised by means of polycephalous serpent-hood, the third, a combination of the two, the upper part of a human body being combined with the lower half of the snake coils.

But the most common form is that of a serpent with five heads. In poetry, a hundred or even a thousand heads are attributed to certain Nagas, especially Shesha.

The central architrave of the eastern *torana* of Sanchi Stupa bears a well-known relief representing the worship of a sacred tree by wild animals among whom can be seen five-headed Nagas side by side with their natural foe, Garuda. On the same eastern gateway of Sanchi we have the scene of the Buddha subduing the venomous dragon in the fire-hut of the Kashyapa brothers of Uruvila. The presence of the Buddha, as is usual in the early school of Central India, is only indicated by a symbol of an empty seat, but the Naga is plainly shown in the semblance of a five-headed cobra.

The bas-reliefs of the Bharhut *stupa* also depict interesting scenes such as a five-headed serpent conversing with an ascetic, Lord Buddha being worshipped by serpent king Airavata or Elapatra. Here too, the sculptor has abstained from portraying the Buddha; the presence of the Master being symbolised by an empty stone seat at the foot of a sacred tree.

Several carved images have been found from regions around Mathura, more particularly from Chhargaon, a village five miles

south of Mathura. An inscribed statue discovered from here deserves special mention. (It is now preserved in the Mathura museum). The Naga is shown standing with his right arm raised over his head as if ready to strike. The left hand is broken. The head is surmounted by a seven-headed snake-hood. From the inscription on the back of the image it appears that it was set up at a water tank in the fourth of the Kushan period during the reign of king Havishka.

The Chhargaoon statue is typical of the few other Naga images found in Mathura district. These icons are still worshipped by local people who call it *Tau-ji* (elder brother) or Baladeva. Modern image of Baladeva or Balarama made in Mathura and Brindavan are nothing but imitation of the ancient Naga figures. (Baladeva, the elder brother of Krishna, was after all an incarnation of Shesha).

A very fine specimen of a seated Naga was found on the site of the Nalanda in the course of excavations in 1920. This Naga holding a rosary in his right and a vase in his left hand is shown sitting in easy posture in the coils of a snake, whose windings are also visible on both sides of the figure while a grand hood of seven cobra-heads form a canopy overshadowing him. This image is identified with Buddhist Saint Nagarjuna, the master of the Mahayana Buddhism.

Ajanta and Ellora Motifs

At Ajanta, one finds Nagaraja, distinguished by a magnificent seven-fold snake-hood, sitting in easy pose, and attended by his consort, likewise seated, and by a female attendant holding a fly-whisk.

In Cave XIV at Ellora one finds Gaja Lakshmi seated on lotus, with waters beneath come alive with Nagas coming forth from among a mass of lotus plants; they hold up treasure vases as a means of tribute to Goddess Lakshmi.

In Cave II at Ajanta one comes across different portrayals of the Nagas; Naga in his serpentine form and as snake god canopied

by a hood of seven serpent heads and then the third portrayal of the Naga, half-human and half-animal.

At Mahabalipuram we see Naga and Nagi, occupying the cleft between two rocks, seem to rise from the nether region. Both carry a hood, seven cobra-heads for the male and three fold head for the female. The Pallava art belongs to the seventh century.

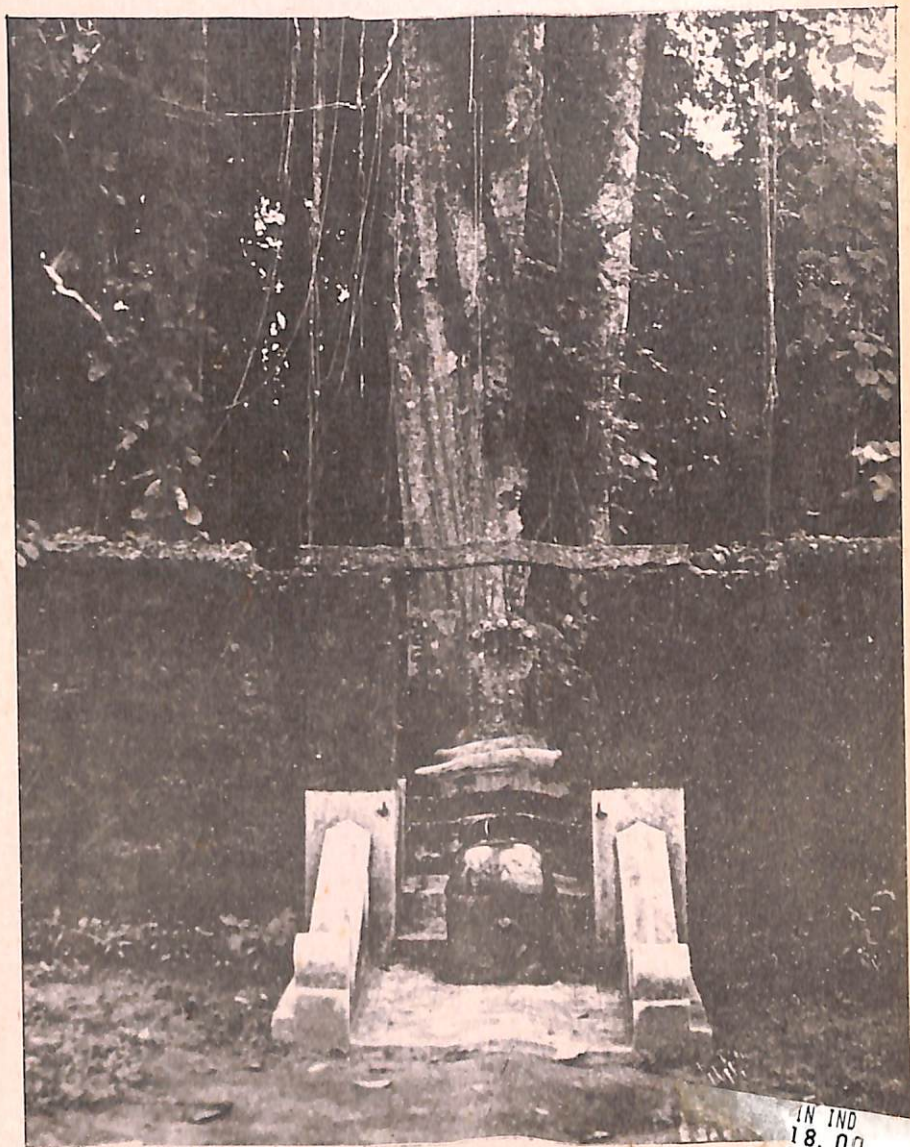
The type of snake-tailed Naga remains a favourite subject in medieval art, and is conspicuous in the temples of Orissa. It finds its finest expression in the wonderfully decorative motif of the amorous Naga couple, the coils of whose serpent bodies are interlaced in a singularly graceful fashion. Some good specimens may be seen in the Calcutta museum.

Art Forms in Greater India

The motif of snake god finds a place in art forms in Greater India too. In the Khmer art of Kampuchea (Cambodia), the many-headed serpent is employed as a decorative device. One is carried away by the sight of the pair of enormous snakes, each carried by a row of fifty-four stone giants placed outside the Gate of Victory of Angkor Thom.

In the Isle of Java it is the human-shaped Naga which has received special favour. At Borobodur the Naga is shown in the human form even in those scenes in which the legend clearly required an animal-shaped creature. The most striking example is the well-known episode of the serpent Muchlinda sheltering Buddha under his hood against the inclemency of the weather. From the Buddhist sculpture it is perfectly clear that Muchlinda, in order to perform his benevolent and pious act, appears as a serpent, whereas, only when his services are not required he assumes human form. The Javanese artist adheres to the principle of representing his Nagas as human beings, their serpent nature merely indicated by snake-hood.





*The many-hooded serpent image in stone canopied by giant tree
in the serpent groves of Pampumekkattumana, Kerála.*

